

## What is “Painless Civilization”?

Painless civilization is a concept that was introduced to fundamentally criticize the current materialistic society and its pathology in “advanced” countries.

“Painless civilization”: A civilization in which the mechanism of “preventive reduction of pain” spreads throughout its society. In a painless civilization we can reduce pain and suffering, and gain more pleasure and comfort. But as a result of that, we gradually come to lose the opportunity of experiencing the “joy of life” that comes from encountering an “unwanted situation” and being forced to transform ourselves to find a new way of thinking and being. A criticism of painless civilization is needed.

[Excerpt from Masahiro Morioka “Painless Civilization and Fundamental Sense of Security” (2005)]

..... From this perspective, prenatal screening and other future technologies can be seen as examples of the devices for preventive reduction of pain, and these devices constitute the dynamism of painless civilization. This means that ethics of human biotechnology can be seen, or should be seen, from the broader perspective of painless civilization. One of the reasons why I use the word “civilization” is that the preventive reduction of pain, which constitutes an important pillar of current human biotechnology, actually began in ancient times when people developed civilizations several thousand years ago. People started agriculture and the maintenance of the rivers in order to preventively reduce pain and suffering caused by the unexpected effects of wild nature, for example, famine and flood. Since then we have developed big cities, invented houses that typhoons cannot destroy, and have established a stable supply of food through the mass production of agricultural goods. These facilities have much contributed to the preventive reduction of various kinds of pain. And in an extension of this line of development, today we have a variety of pain reduction devices in our

society, including that of prenatal screening.

I have a number of things to say about the development of painless civilization, but anyway, let us go back to the concept of “preventive reduction of pain” here. The biggest problem of the preventive reduction of pain is that it makes us lose sight of the possibility of transforming the basic structure of our ways of thinking and being. Let us imagine the case of a disabled fetus. By developing prenatal screening systems the probability of having disabled babies will decrease accordingly. This may be good news for those who want healthy babies, however, we have to take a closer look at the other side of this issue.

A friend of mine once told me the following story. A man, a close friend of hers, was wishing to have a cute healthy baby, but when his baby was born he found the baby severely disabled. He was shocked. He despaired of the future of his baby and himself. The master plan for his life collapsed. He cared for his child but he had lost any hope for his future. However, after going through some years of experience of rearing his disabled baby, he suddenly realized that he had escaped despair somewhere along the line. It was a very strange feeling for him. While caring for his child still remained a burden, it was no longer despair. The reason for this was that his basic framework,

including his way of thinking, feeling, and being, had been profoundly transformed into a new one. And this transformation was made by his encounter with the “unwanted” child and his continuing care for the child. After experiencing this transformation he started to feel that his life was not that of despair, and hence that he never wants to go back to life before the birth of the child, because his child taught him many precious truths of life that he had never known before. He finally gained self-affirmation of his life with his disabled child.

What would have happened if there had been advanced prenatal screening technologies? He would have had a “healthy” baby, but in exchange for this, he would have lost the chance of attaining self-transformation and opportunities to know the “precious truths of life” described above. This is the crucial point. (I made a further analysis by using the terms “the desire of the body” and “the joy of life” in the book *Painless Civilization*). The more we pursue the preventive reduction of pain, the more we lose the chance of transforming the basic structure of our way of thinking and being, and the more we are deprived of opportunities to know precious truths indispensable to our meaningful life. Preventing reduction of pain means preventive reduction of the possibility of “the arrival of the other” (the words of Emmanuel Levinas). It leads us to a situation where all of us live in the state of a living dead, in other words, the situation in which we are able to reduce pain and suffering, and are able to gain more pleasure and comfort, but in proportion to that, we gradually come to lose

the opportunity of experiencing the joy of life that would be experienced when encountering an unwanted situation and being forced to transform ourselves to find a new way of thinking and being we have never known. Remember the discussion about the disappearance of “conviction of love” discussed in Section 4. It is closely connected to the current topic because to love someone means to be forced to transform ourselves, and to feel this unexpected transformation as bliss.

The above is the most significant problem of preventive reduction of pain in general. One may think that even if there is such a danger in preventive reduction of pain it does not necessarily mean that we have to stop the development of this kind of technology. It might be so, but please note that what I am primarily concerned about here is not social policy making but the fate of our contemporary civilization, in other words, the question of what we have to bear as a fate if current civilization continues to develop in this direction. To clarify the fate of contemporary civilization, and to show a way of escape from our dark future (of course it might include the abolishment of certain technologies and policies) is the main objective of the criticism of painless civilization. I believe current bioethical issues must be discussed from this point of view. ....

You can read the entire paper, Masahiro Morioka “Painless Civilization and Fundamental Sense of Security” *Polylog* 6 (2005) at <http://www.lifestudies.org/painlessense.html>.

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